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<https://news.mongabay.com/2023/12/race-to-destroy-the-amazon-forest-brazils-national-congress-set-to-force-construction-of-highway-br-319-commentary/>

## Race to destroy the Amazon forest: Brazil's National Congress set to force construction of Highway BR-319 (commentary)

Commentary by **Philip M. Fearnside** on 20 December 2023



- *Highway BR-319 and planned connecting roads would bring deforesters to much of what remains of Brazil's Amazon forest. BR-319 would connect the notorious "arc of deforestation" in southern Amazonia to Manaus, in central Amazonia.*
- *From Manaus, existing roads would provide access to northern Amazonia, while roads planned to branch off BR-319 would open the western half of Brazil's State of Amazonas to deforestation. BR-319 is now on a fast track for approval by Brazil's ruralist-controlled National Congress.*
- *The proposed law interferes with decisions to be made by Brazil's licensing system and by the Amazon Fund. While these are not in purview of the National Congress, such things can happen in practice in Brazil.*
- *An earlier version of this text was published in Portuguese by [Amazônia Real](#). This is a commentary and does not necessarily reflect the views of Mongabay.*

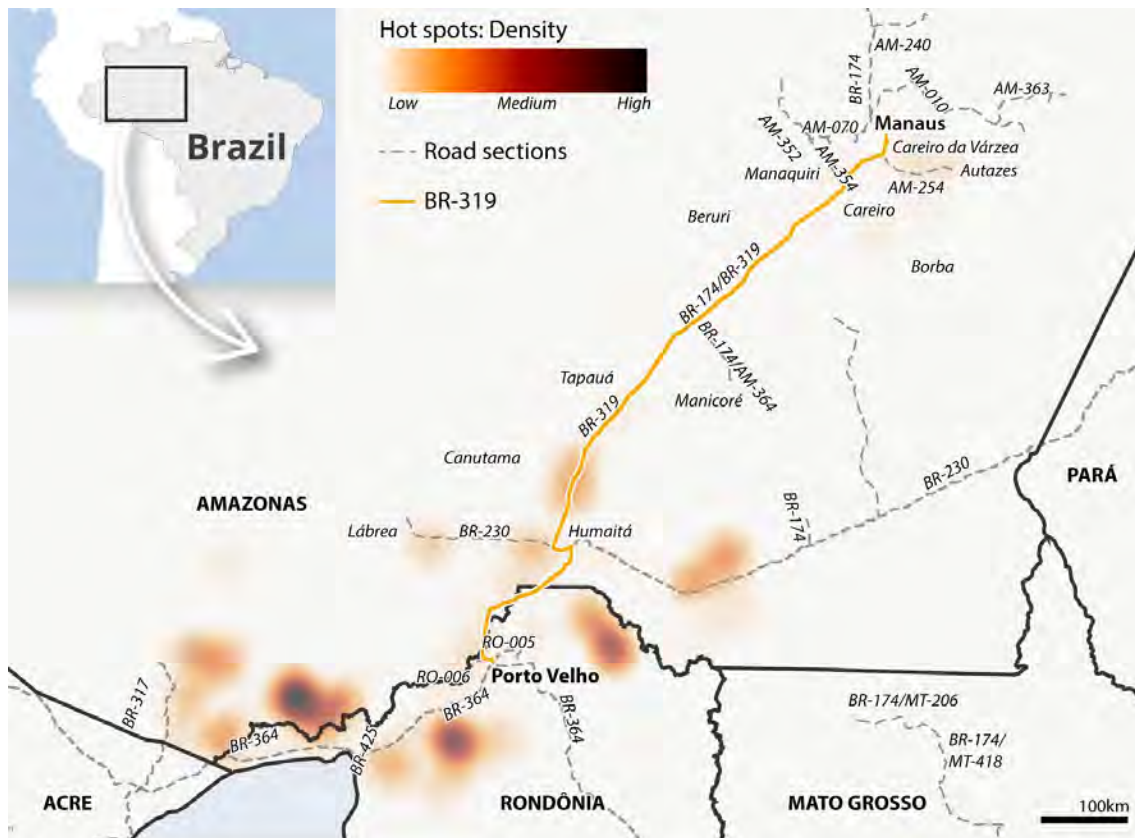
This is a critical moment for the most damaging infrastructure project in the Amazon. On Monday, December 18th, a proposed law ([PL 4994/2023](#)) was put on the [plenary agenda](#) of the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of Brazil's National Congress) under a special "urgency" regime that guarantees minimal debate and a quick vote. The proposed law declares Highway BR-319 (Manaus-Porto Velho) as "critical infrastructure, indispensable to national security" and requires that the project be licensed, and construction funds be allocated immediately.

Article 6 of the PL reads: “BR-319 is classified as a priority infrastructure project in any national development or economic acceleration plans”.

Article 7 of the PL reads: “The use of monetary donations received by the Union to carry out non-refundable actions to promote the conservation and sustainable use of the Legal Amazon, appropriated in a specific account under the custody of the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES), is authorized for public works aimed at recovering, paving and increasing the capacity of the highway.”

In other words, in addition to the enormous impacts of actors and processes from the AMACRO (Amazonas, Acre, Rondônia) deforestation hotspot migrating to much of what remains of the Amazon rainforest (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), the PL even implies using the Amazon Fund to build the road, which would completely destroy credibility of this mechanism to raise funds for conservation in the region. The Minister of Transport had already [announced the intention](#) to use money from the Amazon Fund to make the environmental part of the project viable, and the current PL goes further and wants this money to also pay for the asphalt itself. Despite it not being in purview of the National Congress to interfere with decisions to be made by Brazil’s licensing system and by the Amazon Fund, the PL represents a real danger in practice.

The two houses of the National Congress are effectively controlled by the ruralist caucus (representatives of large landholders) and its allies: just the [Agricultural Parliamentary Front](#) (FPA) itself has 72.9% of the votes in the Chamber of Deputies with 374 of 513 seats and 61.7% in the Senate with 50 of 81 seats. This fact means that the entry into plenary represents a huge danger of this project being carried out in the near future, with irreversible consequences that are beyond the government’s control.



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The red-brown blotches in the map above represent hotspots, indicative of forest fires, while the red dots in the map below show logging spots, which indicate deforestation, all within the area of influence of BR-319.

The likely impact of BR-319 goes far beyond the narrow strip along the highway that is the exclusive focus of [environmental impact assessment](#) and of practically all discussion about the project. The highway would bring the actors and processes of the ‘arc of deforestation’ (in southern Amazonia) to all areas already linked by road to Manaus (in central Amazonia), including [Roraima](#) (in northern Amazonia), and also to the vast “[Trans-Purus](#)” area in the western part of the State of Amazona. The highways that would connect to BR-319 to open up this critical region (such as AM-366), and large projects in this area such as the planned “Solimões Sedimentary Area” gas and oil project (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), are in fact, part of the larger BR-319 plan. They are not separate issues. In fact, the “[Friends of BR-319](#)” lobbying group is also actively promoting AM-366. The enormous likely damage of this fact is the great “elephant in the room” in the entire discussion of BR-319.

BR-319 is promoted by [politicians](#) as a vector of “sustainability”, including the justification in the text of the proposed law. The current minister of transportation even claims that BR-319 would be the “[most sustainable and greenest highway on the planet](#)”. President Lula himself has said that the project could be made viable if the mayors of the municipalities (counties) in the area of the road were to make a “commitment to preservation” (see [here](#) and [here](#)). The total disconnection of these narratives with the real situation would be difficult to exaggerate. Today, BR-319 is basically lawless, where [land grabbing](#), [illegal logging](#), the construction of illegal



side roads (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), and rampant [deforestation](#) are the main activities.

It is interesting that the author of PL 4994/2023 is a federal deputy representing Rondônia, a state that is the largest source of migration of destruction processes to BR-319 and to other deforestation hotspots in the southern portion of the State of Amazonas, such as [BR-230](#). The invasion of areas along BR-319 is occurring from south to north. Certainly, when it comes to invading the vast Trans-Purus region from BR-319, the flow will also come from this direction.

Unfortunately, once areas are opened up by roads, the bulk of what happens is outside the government’s control. History does not follow the announced plans for governance and sustainability, as happened in the past cases of [BR-364](#) and [BR-163](#). Changing this situation will take many years — far beyond any politician’s time in office. In the case of BR-319 and associated roads such as AM-366 and AM-343, continuing to open roads based on a governance discourse goes directly against [Brazil’s national interest](#).

*See related: [Road network spreads ‘arteries of destruction’ across 41% of Brazilian Amazon](#)*



BR-230, also known as the Trans-Amazonian Highway; the R-163 Cuiába-Santarém road; and the BR-319 Manaus-Porto Velho road, shown here, are official roads that cut across the Amazon and have spawned a network of illegal offshoots. Image courtesy of the National Department of Transport Infrastructure (DNIT).

Maintaining the forest precisely in the area to be opened for destruction is essential to maintain the water supply for Brazil’s largest city, as São Paulo depends on water that is recycled by trees in the Trans-Purus region and transported to southeastern Brazil by the winds known as “flying rivers” (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#),

and [here](#)). Deforestation of this area would also release the enormous carbon stocks in the area's [forest](#) and [soil](#), which would be a fatal push over the tipping point to runaway global warming. Brazil would be one of the [biggest victims](#) if this happens.

This disaster is not inevitable yet, as Brazil could decide not to continue with these projects. The economic unfeasibility of BR-319 (see [here](#) and [here](#)) would facilitate a decision not to do so, but it would require political courage that is [currently lacking](#). At present, only the Ministry of the Environment is acting to control deforestation, while the rest of the government promotes projects such as BR-319 that imply vast areas of deforestation over the coming decades. As for the actions that President Lula could take, the first is to veto this proposed law, assuming it is approved by the National Congress, even though it will be likely that the ruralists and their allies will have more than the required 60% of the votes to overturn the veto. It is also urgent for Lula to control his anti-environmental ministers, and some, like the minister of transportation, need to be replaced without delay.

*An earlier version of this text was published in Portuguese by [Amazônia Real](#).*